

Sermon021212

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Recreation or Re-Creation?
Exodus 20:1-11; Mark 2:23-3:6

A few years ago I ran across a parable that I would like to share with you. “In those days God had been God for eons. And it came to pass that there were some who said with resignation: ‘It seems forever.’ And others there were who were more outspoken: ‘It is time to give new blood a chance. We need leadership; and we need creativity – just look how long it has been since God made anything out of nothing.’ And lo their voice prevailed. A God-search committee was elected. The position was advertised, under a policy of open employment. And behold the contenders were many for the position of God, and there were resumes in abundance, as the fishes of the sea.

When the God-search committee had selected those about whom they wished to know more, they sent supplemental questions, the first of which was this: If you were God how would you organize things? In truth the answers came in a veritable flood, as though a dam had burst. One, who knew the labyrinthine ways of human wills, spake thus: ‘Behold, I would set my franchise on the earth, farm out the power in every place of my dominion, grant authority to use my name and trademark exclusively - God’s house, God word, God’s will. Let my franchises compete in holy enterprise for the souls of women and men against all the franchises of the world. And let it be known I will not speak, neither can my products be acquired, through other outlets than my own.’

Another applicant, wise in the ways of organizational holiness and purity answered thus: ‘Let there be authority. Through line and staff let the channels of accountability be clear. From heaven downward to the earth, let the echelons of power be known, who reports to whom, and by whom all will be reviewed; who set the limits on our freedom to decide. If I, decently through channels, do not order it, it is not ordered and behold, there is no clout.’”

Thus saith the applicants. And yea, verily, the God-search committee scratched their heads, for they were inundated by such endless wisdom. And then one said, ‘Would it not be decent and orderly to let GOD be an applicant too?’ And so under the equal opportunity laws, it came to pass.

And God said, ‘In the beginning, we must know what our goals are, before we shall know what is to be organized, or how. My goal is this: I

shall create a community of free women and men, freed by an act of my love, in the person, Jesus, my son; a community committed to one another and to me in partnership, a community of justice and love. I will do this so that you may have a common understanding of my goal. And I shall make my covenant with you, and you all shall be ministers together in my covenant community – men and women, of diverse ages and colors, serving each by each and each for each. The bonds of the community will not be bonds of power, but all authority shall be freely given. And I shall call it by its own new name, for there is none other like it in the earth. I shall call it *The Church.*'

And verily, God got the job. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

This is a long introduction to our look this morning at the 4th commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy." And it really is an introduction to all the 10 commandments, reminding us that these laws are really a framework for what later would be simplified into two: love God with heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. These commandments are a framework for a covenant relationship between God and humanity.

Unfortunately it is all too easy to move from the basic principles of a relationship to focus on a set of rules. Depending on your particular church background you or your parents probably grew up with a number of rules about Sunday. There were the blue laws to prevent stores from being open on Sunday. My memories of Sunday afternoon as a young child, at least when I was living in the States, was that of being mostly bored. No movies or major entertainment was allowed. It was supposed to be a time to relax, to reflect on life and faith – which for a 6 year old went a bit over my head! The next time I was in America, when I was 9, things had changed. My parents gave in and got a TV, and this became my Sunday filler, since it was seen somehow as different from going to the movies!

Over the centuries people have wrestled with the commandment "remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy." And in order to make it "holy" or special, people have tended to overdo it a bit. Part of the commandment says, "the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God-you shall not do any work." In the process of carrying out a principle of rest the tendency of human nature is to tie down any possible loose ends, sometimes going to extremes. In Jesus' day there were over 1500 things one could NOT do on the Sabbath, including plucking grain (this was harvesting and thus work) and healing a man with a damaged hand. Jesus saw this as ridiculous, as our New Testament reading reminds us. And Jesus' words

stand as our best correction: “Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath.”

But Christians sometimes have fallen into the same trap. The 17th century puritans developed all kinds of rules again. There is an actual historical record of a Scotsman who was hauled into court for smiling on the Sabbath!

I’m not sure why we develop these negative rules and attitudes so easily. Maybe because rules make us more secure – that way we don’t have to think for ourselves about what is right or wrong. And maybe because our relationship with God can be such an intangible thing, so we try to make very specific, tangible rules so that by obeying them we hope to improve the odds of our being accepted by God. It’s easier to reach for the external actions, though in the process we can lose the heart of the matter.

Perhaps in reaction to previous abuse of keeping the Sabbath holy, today it is hard to find any strong distinctions for Sunday. As someone commented, “My great grandparents talked about the “holy Sabbath,” my grandparents the “Sabbath,” my parents “Sunday,” and today it simply “the weekend.” The pendulum has swung way in the other direction!

Somewhere in-between these two extremes the 4th commandment calls us to remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. This is an unusual commandment – in part because it is one of only two that has a positive expression, rather than the “you shall nots” of the other 8 commandments. And it is unique in that it gives a reason for the commandment. All the others assume that you don’t need a reason not to kill, or steal, or whatever. But this gives an explanation. In fact not one reason but two. For in Deuteronomy the 10 commandments are repeated, almost word for word, but with one major difference – it gives a different reason for keep the Sabbath day.

In Exodus the reason is that “for in 6 days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the 7th day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.” But in Deuteronomy the reason for making it a day of rest is this: “remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”

The Exodus tradition puts the reason as coming from the very order of creation; the Deuteronomy version holds it up as a social ideal. When you put them together we realize that the issue is not worship and re-creation vs. rest and recreation – rather it is both and. Exodus directs us to the contemplation of God, which becomes worship and prayer. Deuteronomy

directs us to social leisure, which becomes play. Praying and playing can be two sides of the same coin; we need both in our lives to have a healthy life, and a healthy spiritual life.

In the Deuteronomy version we are told that is important to rest. The Hebrews had just escaped from Egyptian slavery where they had known no day of rest. So this was a new concept in the world. When I studied in Israel I was told that in Jesus' day the Jews were known all through the Mediterranean world for two unique things: they were the only people who refused to make any images of their god; and they were the only people who took off one day out of every seven to rest.

But the Exodus version gives us a deeper reason for keeping the Sabbath. In our society there are more opportunities for rest and relaxation than at any time in human history. So the need to set aside a day for rest and recreation is not as crucial. But Exodus tells us that the Sabbath points us to the very order of creation, and that we are re-created by the sense of the Holy. The Hebrew root of the word "holy" is the idea of separateness, set-apart-ness. In the Old Testament a holy thing was set apart for the worship of God. The Bible, for example, is called holy because it is set apart from other books.

The 7th day of creation, as a holy day set apart, implies that when you have put your mind, heart, and hands to a project, then you let go and let God breathe life into it so that it may become a living form – as the story of creation poetically describes it.

The native Hawaiians have an unusual word for visitors to the islands: "haoles." It seems that when the Christian missionaries first arrived, they set about to convert the natives from their old religious ways. They set up little chapels in which the people should worship God. Being a peace-loving people, the local inhabitants were easily led into the new discipline. But they found one thing quite strange. Whereas in their Kahuna practice they always followed their times of worship of the gods with a period of silence "to breathe life into their devotions," the Christians simply rattled off their prayers and got up and walked out. So the natives called the Christians, and later all foreigners, "Haoles." The word means "without breath."

This is the spirit of the 4th commandment "remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy." Take time to let the Spirit breathe life into your whole being, to pause and become centered in the Divine Flow of life, of faith, of love. Let Sunday be a time for you and me to catch our breath, to breathe in a deeper sense of life and faith, even as we also build some rest and recreation into our schedules. And if work and other schedules prevent us

from doing this well on Sunday, then take some other times in the week to perform the same tasks.

I've been told that the Dutch have a word for Sunday – they call it “God’s Dyke” because they know that without dykes to keep out the sea, life itself would be inundated and destroyed by the hostile elements around them. Sunday is a day to keep holy, a time set apart for recreation and re-creation. It is a time to regain our vision, our perspective, on our values and our very lives.

Let me close by reading from Isaiah, chapter 58: “If you watch your step on the Sabbath and don’t use my holy day for personal advantage; if you treat Sabbath as a day of joy, God’s holy day as a celebration; if you honor it by refusing ‘business as usual,’ making money, running here and there – then you’ll be free to enjoy God! Oh, I’ll make you ride high and soar above it all...!”

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.